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Josef Wiesehöfer. “ “Rulers by the Grace of God”, “Liar Kings”, and “Oriental Despots”: (Anti-)Monarchic Discourse in Achaemenid Iran”

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Josef Wiesehöfer. “ “Rulers by the Grace of God”, “Liar Kings”, and “Oriental Despots”: (Anti-)Monarchic Discourse in Achaemenid Iran” in Henning Börm (ed.). *Antimonarchic Discourse in Antiquity*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2015, p. 45-66, (Studies in Ancient Monarchies 3)

- 1 Wiesehöfer addresses the difficult topic of anti-monarchic discourse in Achaemenid Iran, complementing the scant evidence with a rich methodological framework. In the prefatory section, he remarks that the discourse on ancient Near Eastern monarchy seldom refers to ‘the different perspectives of authors or artists’ and ‘to the regional and diachronic variety’, reminding that kingship had been ‘an object of systematic reflection’ since the Sumerian King List. Before addressing the topic from the point of view of the classical authors (section 5), heavily relying on their own cultural representation of monarchy and implementing the ‘caricature of an Oriental despotism’, the author reviews the evidence which permits to define the ‘Achaemenid ideal ruler’ (section 2) which, in turn, implies the critics of the ‘liar kings’ (section 3) since within a big territorial state ‘the critique of monarchy takes the shape of a criticism of kings’. Then the ‘Iranian mythological tradition’ (section 4), later shaped in literary works like the Book of Lords (Xth *adāyānāmag*), is taken into account, considering it as a further source for the study of the

monarchic tradition. This ‘Iranian national history’ was ‘the taste, the self-image and the interests of an aristocratic audience’ and, while the king (and even the bad monarch) had recognition and his charisma had not been denied, the king himself ‘had not been a god-like figure, free of all criticism and with an unlimited sovereignty, but often enough a rather sad figure of a more than dubious humanness’ (see also García Sánchez, 2014 “Le realeza aqueménida” [abstract by GPB in this volume] and Wiesehöfer, 2014 “Not a God, but a Person Apart” [abstract by SAB in this volume]). In the end, the author recommends not revitalizing the paradigm of ‘Oriental despotism’, but rather expanding our views of ‘the extent and range of Ancient Near Eastern political debates and civil participation’.

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